DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 321 919 RC 017 618

AUTHOR Ruppert, James
TITLE The Russians Are Coming, the Russians are Dead: Myth and Historical Consciousness in Two Contact Narratives.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at Modern Languages Association Conference "Encounters in the Oral Tradition: Native American Stories of Cultural Contact" (Washington, DC, December 27-30, 1989).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Alaska Natives; American Indian Culture; *American Indian History; Beliefs; Cognitive Processes; *Cognitive Style; Culture Conflict; *Culture Contact; *Encoding (Psychology); History Instruction; Mythology; *Oral History; Religious Factors
IDENTIFIERS Ahtna (Tribe); Contact Narratives; *Oral Tradition; Tlingit (Tribe)

ABSTRACT

This research paper examines hidden cultural patterns establishing the expression of historical thought in Native Alaskan narratives which describe first contact with Russians. Historical consciousness in oral contact stories is always mythic in form, as well as in content. Native American oral cultures understood new events by "troping," or placing them into cosmologies and "domains of experience" built from native culture. The point is illustrated using a Tlingit story of first contact with Russian explorers. Ship sails are identified as the returning "Raven," who created the world. Unfamiliar sugar and rice are "sand" and "maggots." In the narrative, the mythical merges with the historical to become legendary Tlingit history. Oral historical discourse, then, is best understood by identifying mythological icons and determining their influence upon actions and discourse during perceptually charged historical events. Narratives from the Ahtna people are used to suggest that troping may occur at the deepest levels of precritical thought. The stories, involving hostilities between the Ahtna and the Russians, are similar to other Ahtna stories involving different hostilities which, in turn, contain their own elements of history and mythology. Myth may be laid upon an event like window blinds, allowing only the historical outline and mythic pattern. It is concluded that first-contact experiences present gaps between the familiar and unfamiliar, between the seen world and spiritual world. During confrontation with the unfamiliar, deep mythical thought serves to call up familiar structures for understanding. (TES)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
James Ruppert
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED321919

"The Russians are Coming, The Russians are Dead:
Myth and Historical Consciousness in Two Contact Narratives"

Raven and the Russians are two unlikely partners in historical narratives of the first contact between Europeans and the Natives of Southern Alaska. For those of us brought up with Western conceptions of history, these two classes of beings could never meet in anything we would call history. Not only do we expect a projection of uninvolved objectivity, but conventionally, for us, history must evoke a reality of facts and physical validation, a reality like our own today, a realm the antithesis of which is myth, by which we mean a field of unsubstantiated fantasy supported only by belief. Because this separation is so strong in our culture, I fear we tend to misread many first contact narratives, establishing motives and analyzing actions with as much misperception as the original actors. For each time we read oral narratives of first contact, we recreate that moment of cross-cultural fertilization, as the storyteller recreates the beginnings in the telling of the tale and we also enter a reality where myth and history fuse, support each other and influence action. David Rasmussen reminds us that myth is concerned: " . . . not with presenting an objective vision of the world, but to present man's true understanding of himself in the world in which he lives " (10). Oral historical narratives investigate man's understanding of himself but in the context of an unusual

RC017618

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

event, an event the Western reader perceives through assumptions of history and something we call facts. The study of oral historical narratives deconstructs our notion of the objective nature of events. As such oral contact narratives express a vision of experience where history is suffused with myth to the point that signification exudes from mythic patterns often submerged under the surface of narrative, but always present in the historical/mythical consciousness of the native actors. In oral contact narratives, historical consciousness is always mythic in form as well as content.

Recently historians have begun to explore the hidden assumptions, expectations, and cultural patterns which support Western views of history. The precritical cognitive positions underlying historical thought have been extensively explored by Hayden White. As White examines the deep structure of historical thought, he has identified four major tropes of Western cultural thought which prestructure ways of thinking about events we wish to place in a history. However, White is aware that while historical thinking is universal, the precritical cognitive positions taken by cultures may be quite different. Following Freud, White argues that:

> Understanding is a process of rendering the unfamiliar, or the "uncanny" in Freud's sense of the term, familiar; or removing it from the domain of things felt to be "exotic" and unclassified into one or another domain of experience encoded adequately enough to be felt to

> be humanly useful, nonthreatening, or simply known by association. This process of understanding can only be tropical in nature, for what is involved in the rendering of the unfamiliar into the familiar is a troping that is generally figurative. (Tropics 5)

In oral cultures of Native America, that process of understanding proceeded by placing new events into a cosmology and epistemological "domain of experience" based on a common core of cultural meaning; that is, the oral tradition and the living field of myth as it interpenetrated with tne lives of the community everyday on every level. Participants then in this oral and mythic field of experience would attempt to find meaning in new events on the historical plane by reference to what White calls "a deep level of consciousness" on which the oral historian would also have to adopt "conceptual strategies." The nature of figuration in this context leads to what might be called "mythic troping," for in the worldview of many native societies, meaning is revealed when the new event is fixed or associated in a relationship to the mythic/spiritual world which surges behind the practical perceptions of the events of life. Contact narratives have survived for so long in the oral imagination, not only because they reveal cultural values confronted with a new challenge, but also because they present those moments when mythic prefiguration is called to come to the fore of human experience to make familiar the unfamiliar.

An oral first-contact narrative of the Tlingit might make

this process clear. Though collected in the 1960s, the narrative has survived for centuries in various forms in Tlingit clans. The narrative begins with the Tlingits seeing something white bobbing out on the waves. It is the white sail of a ship coming in the bay probably the Russian explorers Izmailov and Bocharov. At one point it was coming closer:

"What's that?

"What's that, what's that?"

"It's something different!"

"It's something different!"

"Is it Raven?"

"Maybe that's what it is."

"I think that's what it is --

Raven who created the world.

He said he would come back again."

Some dangerous thing was happening. (Dauenhauer 303-5)

Knowing it is something different and probably dangerous, they abandon the village for the protection of the forest. (Long ago in story time, Raven was all white before he turned black). The people fear that they will turn to stone if they watch Raven come to them, but they also are interested and excited. Uncertainty abounds as the people try to decide how to interpret the meaning of the event, and the mythic level of experience seems make the most sense. They hear an unusual and fearful sound (an anchor being dropped). Soon they decide to roll skunk cabbage as a telescope (it will keep them from turning to stone) and they

watch things climbing around on Raven. The mythic troping has brought the unfamiliar into the field of human/spirit interaction. Only by ritual action, can humans clarify the meanings which come from the voices of the spirit world and make them palatable to human perceptions. "When no one turned to stone while watching, someone said, 'Let's go out there. We'll go out there.' 'What's that?' Then there were two young men; from the woods, a canoe was pulled down to the beach." (Dauenhauer 305-7) The men board and are shown many wonderful things like mirrors, and then are given food to eat which they take to be maggots and sand (actually it is sugar and rice) and liquor to drink. When they return to shore, they tell everyone about the many people in the ship and all the amazing things they had seen and eaten. Then the people all go out in their canoes to the ship.

In confronting the new phenomenon, the Tlingit attempt to place it in a conceptual framework which accepts miraculous events such as the one they are seeing. Oral tradition as well as shamanistic and hunting experience establish the familiarity of the Tlingit with the animal/spiritual world around them. The vision of Great Raven returning evokes an appropriate ritualistic response by the human community. Raven as the source of much of creation, is also known for originating many unique and wonderful phenomenon. Tlingit worldview would have found no difficulty in seeing a unity in what we would call mythic and historical elements. Furthermore, anthropologist Fredrica de Laguna noted the fluid nature of Tlingit conceptions of history and myth:

> The past, as we have seen could be conceived as belonging to two different epochs: "long ago", the time of myth, when the world is not yet as it is today; and the more recent time of "history." Yet my efforts to separate the events belonging to these two realms of time show how far they may overlap; sometimes we seem to be dealing with what might constitute a third, intermediate period of legendary history. However, it is neither possible to arrange mythical events in any temporal sequence, nor can one tell when historical time began. "Mythical" and "historical" events are often equally miraculous from our point of view, and not all natives agree on the distinctions between them. In some sense, "myth" time is a timeless eternity. (798)

The return of a powerful mythic character as or in a ship while unusual would not be impossible. De Laguna struggles with the classification of events into the two Western categories and settles for a third category which acknowledges the indeterminant nature of much discourse. She concludes the myth time is still here in many ways. For the Tlingit, mythic perception infused everyday perception, gave meaning to it, presented a trope for how new events connected to the past. Legendary history describes the nature of all that we call history because mythic time ultimately is always present, a timeless eternity. De Laguna's insight finds expansion as White and other contemporary histor-

ians are attempt to deconstruct the Western notion of history to reveal its mythic and narrative underpinnings. De Laguna found many stories which were difficult to categorize; for instance, in the 1950s the Tlingit were telling tales where the Russians are trying to get Raven drunk with their whiskey or where Raven is said to be still living in a cave in the Aleutians. These stories erase our definitions of myth and history, and establish the all-pervasiveness of legendary history. White explores this flexible position of the storyteller as oral historian when he writes:

> "The lateness of the invention of historical discourse in human history and the difficulty of sustaining it in times of cultural breakdown (as in the early Middle Ages) suggests the artificiality of the notion that real events could "speak themselves" or be represented as "telling their own story." Such a fiction would have posed no problems before the distinction between real and imaginary events was imposed upon the storyteller; storytelling becomes a problem only after two orders of events dispose themselves before the storyteller as possible components of stories and storytelling is compelled to exfoliate under the injunction to keep the two orders unmixed in discourse. What we wish to call mythic narrative is under no obligation to keep the two orders of events, real and imaginary, distinct from one another." White, Content, 3-4.

The Tlingit storytellers reflect the people's perception which allows equal reality to events validated by what Western thinking would call "objective observation" or "imagination," thus erasing the distinction between the two orders, though a narrative may end up emphasizing one level of reality over another. White's remarks presuppose not only that all cultures make these distinctions, but also that the criteria for this distinction is the same. White's task here, of course, is to analyze deep structure of Western history, but what he says of mythic narrative is even truer for oral legendary history. Behind the Tlingit oral historical tale, stands many Raven tales which tell of his great creative ability as well as the dramatic way in which he acts. One can see the Tlingit using the mythic stories as a blue print for understanding an unusual event. The events are made familiar by reference to mythological events which are the origin and model for contemporary events. It is not unusual that these mythological events would form the basis of Tlingit epistemology and historical consciousness, for Tlingit traditional thought more consistently deals with events than with qualities or essences. Narrative rather than exposition or abstract explanation, was the form in which the conceptual schema and the values of the social order were verbally expressed.

It seems that some of what White concludes about precritical historical thinking in the Western tradition may be applicable to historical thinking in Native oral tradition. The precritical cultural codes may differ as well as the forms by which reference

is made back to a familiar meaning structure, but the oral historical account mediates between the event and the pre-established forms of meaning and narrative in much the same way as White describes the process (White calls these forms, tropes in his specific discussion of history and Western epistemology). White explains how these pre-critical mythic structures act as an icon to render events familiar:

> "It seems to me that we must say of histories what Frye seems to think is true only of poetry or philosophy, namely that, considered as a system of signs, the historical narrative points in two directions simultaneously: toward the events described in the narrative and toward the story type or mythos which the historian has chosen to serve as the icon of the structure of events. The narrative itself is not the icon; what it does is describe events in the historical record in such a way as to inform the reader what to take as an icon of the events so as to render them "familiar" to him. The historical record thus mediates between the events on one side and the pregenric plot structures conventionally used in our culture to endow unfamiliar events and situations with meaning, on the other." (Tropics 88)

In order to completely understand oral historical discourse, the question then becomes not whether or not if there are mythological icons informing an oral historical narrative, but what

are they and how might they have influenced actions as well as discourse in such emotionally and perceptually charged events such as first contact between native groups and European explorers.

While the end of the Tlingit story may tempt some readers to conclude that our concepts of history and myth have been vindicated, the on-going oral tradition of stories chronicling the interactions between the Russians and Raven continue to blur those distinctions. This aspect of oral tradition leads de Laguna to conclude there is an indeterminate area called legendary history, but more precisely, what she was seeing was the process of mythic troping. The following first-contact narrative recorded among the Ahtna suggests that mythic troping may occur at the deepest level of precritical structuring. It recounts the arrival of the first Russians to Southern Alaska. The Russians were coming up the Copper River. As they do so, they found the local headmen along the way and whipped them in order to establish dominance over them. After they whipped the first chief, a boy from upriver walked out to check his traps and hears sobbing. "He listens carefully and it sounds like a person. He returns to his grandmother and brings the news to her. 'It didn't sound like an animal. I hear a person sobbing'" (Kari 77). The boy expresses confusion at hearing a grown man, a chief, cry. He thinks it might have been an animal. What miraculous event could make a chief cry? The community is warned, but no action is taken. Unprecedented social phenomenon might have been sug-

gested, but at this point, only careful observation will allow the essence of the event to reveal itself. Its mythic foundations are unseen and must emerge before complete understanding is achieved. The Russians repeat their cultural violations of the nature of human interaction and hospitality when they whip another chief. The chief asks them if they know whom they are whipping. "You are doing this to Yalniil Ta 'Father of he is Carrying It.' Do you know you are doing this to someone who is vicious?" He calls out his personal name to challenge their right to act this way. Who are they? Are their names and positions higher than his? How do they fit into the social world of human interrelations and interactions? In response the Russians take the men's weapons, enslave the women and turn the men out naked and unarmed to freeze. They treat them like animals, and have forfeited the right to be treated equally in the world of Ahtna social responsibility.

Taken in by other Ahtnas, the humiliated men engage in a dialogue over what they should do, but their conversation takes the ritual form of making medicine, joining their medicine power with other Ahtna to see how they should understand these events and thus act. When the spirit world signs are favorable, they decide to move in on the Russians. An Athabaskan who was serving as a unsympathetic guide for the Russians, C'uket Ta', helps the Ahtna, counseling them as to the appropriate time to attack. He holds them back until the time is right, saying, "It would be difficult meat. You should wait!" (Kari 84) C'uket Ta's

warning reminds the Ahtna that before the voices of the spirit world are heard, the attack would not be appropriate. The Ahtnas allow the spirit world to control the structure of events for many reasons, one of which is that their response will need to merge with a mythological template for experience, because their act will become part of a complex relationship between humans, animals, and myth. The Russians have crossed the line dividing humans and animals; they have forced others to cross, and as such, they can now be hunted like meat. At Batzulnetas (Roasted Salmon Creek) the whole Russian party is killed.

On a clear social level, the narrative of the killing of the Subrenikov party has precedent in a number of war stories that the Ahtna tell about their warfare with the Eskimos groups of the Kodiak peninsula. The narrative pattern is established where the Eskimos come up the river, raiding, burning caches, and stealing slaves. (Kari; de Laguna, "Ahtna") In Ahtna historical thinking, it is axiomatic that troublemakers come up the Copper River, that they commit atrocities, and that they can be followed and killed with little thought of the web of human social interactions which this might upset. This prestructuring device does not seem to require any mythological troping on the part of the Ahtna. As a historical narrative, the unfamiliar is conveniently set in a familiar structure of intertribal warfare.

Yet behind this surface level we may still see the blurring of the Western distinction between "real" and "imaginary" in a story of "The Tailed Ones" which forms a precritical template for

the killing of the Russians. The Ahtnas appear to make a distinction between what we would call history and myth on the basis of geographical place. A narrative which is said to have happened at a particular location is seen as historical, while narrative not associated with a known place is said to be a traditional story from long ago. However, the Cet'aenn stories offer the non-Ahtna reader a window into the mythic presuppositions and precritical thought structure which helped mold the Ahtnas actions, actions which do not exist solely on the level of revenge. The Cet'aenn narrative is an exception to the Ahtna rule. It tells of what would appear to be mythical creatures, but in a specific geographic location, a location strongly linked with migration stories and war stories which are always considered to be historical. Consequently, these stories and beings hold a place in Ahtna thinking that supercedes even their own distinction between myth and history.

The Cet'aenn were ape-like beings with long tails but also human-like faces and hands. These beings lived long ago until the Ahtna destroyed them all. A lone Ahtna, hunting in the area of Batzulnetas, was killed by "The Tailed Ones." A second hunter sees them playing with the head of the slain Ahtna. He returns to tell of the beings observing that when it rains, they run for cover in their caves. The Ahtna would like to attack and the medicine men call forth rain. When they have the Cet'aenn trapped in the caves, they set fire to the surrounding bushes and throw them into the cave. The fire heats the obsidian rocks

which abound in the cave until they explode, sending sharp shrapnel-like pieces throughout the cave and killing all of the Cet'aenn. The Ahtna then discover a stream teaming with salmon and an excellent housing site. They set up their new village called "Roasted Salmon Place."

A couple of observation are immediately apparent. Behind the story of the killing of the Russians we see the story of warfare with the Eskimos, but also the Cet'aenn story in which the Ahtna now are the invaders from downriver. The strange new beings that they find threaten the Ahtna social order, in much the same way that the Russians and Ahtna threatened each other's social orders. The Cet'aenn can only be killed with the help of the medicine men and the spirit world, just as killing the Russians requires the help of the spirit world. The destruction of the Cet'aenn resulted in a rich new village for the Ahtna, and a natural assumption based on the mythic insight, would be that if allowed, the Russians could kill all the Ahtna and acquire the riches of "Roasted Salmon Place." It is not much of a leap to appreciate the mythic imperative for the destruction of the Russians generates an expectation of significant beneficial results.

However, to say that the Cet'aenn story is behind the oral historical account may not be exactly precise, perhaps it is more appropriate to say as Ricoeur (143) suggests that myth is in front of the event, like blinds allowing the audience to see enough of the outline of events to recognize the mythic pattern

which renders the event meaningful. The narrative then can be seen to "point both ways toward the event and toward mythos" as White suggests of Western historical accounts, but here the icon which renders the event familiar and thus meaningful is a mythic event not included in the text. Yet this mythic narrative functions as trope in oral tradition the same way that White's pregenric plot structures do for Western historical narratives.

Perhaps we can see how closely allied in oral tradition are the forms we call myth and history. In the Tlingit narrative, the event calls forth a testing of myth as content of the narrative, while in the Ahtna story, myth predisposes the form of the story and maybe even more significantly, the event itself. As White discusses historical narratives he notes the affiliation between myth, literature, and history:

> because the systems of meaning production shared by all three are distillates of the historical experience of a people, a group, a culture. And the knowledge provided by narrative history is that which results from the testing of the systems of meaning production originally elaborated in myth and refined in the alembic of the hypothetical mode of fictional articulation."
> (White, Content, 45)

Oral historical narratives may function in White's sense of literature refining and distilling meaning production originally developed in more mythic narratives. Yet we must remember that in a sense all oral narratives are "historical" in that the

retell what are believed true events. There are no categories in Ahtna nor Tlingit which correspond to our conception of fiction. First contact narratives present events where the testing of meaning production comes to the forefront. At those moments, gaps open up between the seen world and the unseen world, between the familiar and the unfamiliar. At those moments, the mythic pregenric structures may be called to the forefront as now the screen is noticed as well as the phenomenon seen through the screen. Moments of the greatest epistemological crises create moments of active mythological inquiry; moments which are problematic, and unfamiliar require the deepest levels of mythological thought. Mythological troping may illuminate more than just narratives; "objective" events themselves have perplexing story natures.

James Ruppert
University of Alaska - Fairbanks

Works Cited

Dauenhauer, Nora Marks and Richard. Haa Shuka', Our Ancestors: Tlingit Oral Narratives. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987.

de Laguna, Frederica Under Mount Saint Elias: The History and Culture of the Yakutat Tlingit Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology, volume 7 P. 2 , 1960.

--- and Catharine McClellan. "Ahtna" In Handbook of North American Indians, Volume 6, Subarctic. Ed. J Helm. Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1981

Kari, James, ed. Tatl'ahwt'aenn Nenn', The Headwaters People's Country: Narratives of the Upper Ahtna Athabaskans. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press and the Alaska Native Language Center, 1985.

Rasmussen, David. Mythic-Symbolic Language and Philosophical Anthropology. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971.

Ricoeur, Paul. Hemeneutics and the Human Sciences. Ed. and translated by John Thompson. London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

White, Hayden. The Content of Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.

---. Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.